

## Conference Paper

# Yuliy Engel on Tschaikovsky in the Context of Early 20th-Century Russian Musical Culture

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## Abstract

The article explores aspects of Russian musical criticism in early 20th century. Based on the critical articles of Yu. Engel, the author explores how Tchaikovsky's music was perceived and assessed during this era. The general conclusion is that the Moscow critic's views on Tchaikovsky's symphonic works were highly important in recognizing Tchaikovsky as the "first Russian symphonist".

**Keywords:** criticism, music, composer, symphony, assessment, perception.

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## Highlights

1. Critical articles of Yu. Engel are devoted to different genres of Tchaikovsky's works (opera, symphony, chamber music). His articles demonstrate many aspects of the rethinking of great composer's works (historical, cultural and musical analysis of Tchaikovsky's works, their theatrical and concert interpretations, the problems of performance - vocal, instrumental, conducting, etc.).
2. The polemical seal of Yu. Engel's articles are aimed against the early 20th-century opponents of Tchaikovsky's music: those who embraced musical modernism, adherents of "new" art, proponents of radical innovation, who rejected the composer's romantic musical style. Among them were: A. Scriabin, partially L. Sabaneev, V. Karatygin, V. Stasov, etc.).
3. Talking about Tchaikovsky's work, Y. Engel (along with N. Myaskovsky) was the first to deeply appreciate the outstanding achievements of Tchaikovsky as a symphonist, which played enormous role both in Russian and in global musical culture.
4. Engel paid particular attention to the perception of Tchaikovsky's music by the audience: here the critic has presciently outlined the assessments of the great composer provided by the future generations.

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## 1. Introduction

The early 20th-century attitudes to Tchaikovsky, when his music was significantly underappreciated, remains insufficiently explored in musicology, despite the fact that we can find some concrete assessments in a number of works (B. Asafiev, E. Orlova, E. Ruchevskoy, A. Klimovitsky, E. Vlasova, A. Poznansky and other scientists). The purpose of this article is to provide culturological interpretation of the works of a talented musical critic Y. Engel about Tchaikovsky, comparing them with the opinions expressed by the other early 20th-century critics. The purposes of this article are: 1) to examine the views of critical “opponents” of Tchaikovsky’s music, 2) to demonstrate the originality of Y. Engel’s critical views and judgments, 3) to identify the insight and scholarly foresight of Y. Engel in his assessments of Tchaikovsky’s – “the first Russian symphonist” and the “Russian Beethoven” – innovations.

## 2. Methods

The article uses a comparative historical approach, as well as the methods of cultural interpretation and musicological analysis.

## 3. Results

The reasons for this significant underestimation of the great composer’s work in the early 20s century are that the musical culture of this era, and the century as a whole, was shaped within a new rational, technocratic and urban paradigm alien to Tchaikovsky’s “romantic realism” (M. Muginstein). Many musicians and critics who favored the newest avant-garde trends and styles disregarded his music and sharply criticized it, considering it obsolete and useless for modern people. Examples of this attitude can be found in the articles of many highly respected critics of the time – for example L. Sabaneev and V. Karatygin, who were fierce opponents of Tchaikovsky. Critic V. Derzhanovsky (editor of the *Music* magazine) wrote about it in his letters to N. Myaskovsky: “My personal opinion is that both Allah-Scriabin and his prophet-Sabaneyev are v e r y wrong in their attitudes to Tchaikovsky...” [see 2, p. 487] (emphasis by Derzhanovsky). Indeed, Scriabin disliked Tchaikovsky and his followers – Rachmaninoff in particular – because their music was too materially tangible, imbued with the moods that were alien to Scriabin: sadness, despondency, human suffering. This radical rejection of Tchaikovsky’s music was conditioned for Scriabin by his different perception of reality and art, which he

understood as a celebration, as well as of sound, harmony and keys, which he used in search of supreme immaterialization [3, pp.264-265].

V. Karatygin was also very ambivalent about Tchaikovsky's music. For example, in his 1913 article in Tchaikovsky's memory he wrote about his "youthful love" for Tchaikovsky's music. Later the critic became less enthusiastic about Tchaikovsky, having immersed in the music of other composers (Rimsky-Korsakov, Borodin, Mussorgsky, Scriabin, French Impressionists, etc.), although, using his characteristic insight, he very precisely and subtly defined the essence of Tchaikovsky's lyrical talent. In his article the critic expressed many negative assessments of Tchaikovsky and his music (in particular, his romance songs, operas *The Maid of Orléan* and *Mazepa*, etc.) Karatygin was also wrong in his assessment of Tchaikovsky's tragic element: "In correspondence with the lightweight character of Tchaikovsky's *Weltschmerz*, his ideas of fate, suffering and other scary things – Tchaikovsky's music is powerless to express *majestic, sublime, stupendous* moods. Without *great sorrow* there are no *great joys*, no *great movements of the soul* in general" [1] (here and below emphasis is mine – O. D.) It is equally impossible to agree with Karatygin's verdict diminishing the importance of "earthly" and "human" elements in Tchaikovsky's music: "Tchaikovsky never raises his listeners, never transports them to another worlds like Beethoven, Wagner, Scriabin. Tchaikovsky is *always here, on this earth, with us, he suffers our sorrows and rejoices in our small human happiness*". Believing that this was the composer's weakness, Karatygin forgets that these elements are precisely what constitutes the *great merit* of his music, which always addresses *the human and the humanity*.

Yuliy Engel, a remarkable Moscow critic of the early 20th century, provided very different assessment of Tchaikovsky and his music. His articles demonstrate highly respectful and reverent attitude to the composer and express understanding and high assessment of Tchaikovsky's outstanding achievements. Such attitudes went contrary to the contemporary opinions of Sabaneyev and Karatygin, as well as to the dismissive assessments of Tchaikovsky given by the "*ardent fanatics of the new art*" that were popular and increasingly widespread during the Modernism era.

Let us now explore in more detail Yu. Engel's perception and assessment of Tchaikovsky's symphonic oeuvre.

Of scholarly significance are Engel's articles about the Tchaikovsky's *Manfred* symphony, which was performed in concert of the Russian Musical Society (December 1901, conducted by V. I. Safonov). In his review of this concert, Engel focused on an issue highly important for his time and still relevant today [4]: the issue of *interpretation* of a musical work, which largely determines its stage life and is also of primary importance

for the *audience's* understanding of the music and of the composer's idea: "Let us not forget," – wrote the critic, – "that any musical work (especially an orchestral score) like a *living organism* exists only during the *performance*; when it is on paper, it is just a scheme, a skeleton, a music in its potentiality and not a real music full of powerful life force". He applied the same idea to the audience's perception: "it needs to hear, at least once, a good performance of an outstanding work; then it will be listening to it attentively, understand and love it" even in mediocre performance "for, once discovering the beauty, it is easy to separate it from all chance and extraneous depredations" [5, p. 93].

Yu. Engel wrote a vivid and topical article about the cycle of concerts "In Memory of Tchaikovsky" (they took place in April 1904 in Moscow and were organized by Modest Illich Tchaikovsky). The critic noted that the great composer's brother "introduced in the program a number of major orchestral works of the latter (including all his six symphonies) and invited wonderful performers, such as Nikish with his orchestra". According to Engel, the organizers of the three concerts initially experienced some doubts "whether the public would respond", whether it would understand "with its emphatical presence their true meaning and significance?" The critic noted with satisfaction that "the audience responded despite *the late time of the season and troubling military events*, all three concerts were overcrowded and <...> enjoyed the greatest success" [5, p. 132].

In this article Engel proposed a significant and scholarly important evaluation of Tchaikovsky's skills as a symphonist. The critic was perhaps the first to formulate concisely and thoroughly the scope of Tchaikovsky's achievement and of his symphonism, both for Russian and for European culture: "And this vivid enchanting picture has shown us again that in Tchaikovsky we have not only *the greatest Russian symphonist* but also one of the greatest contemporary *European* symphonists. By this we mean not just the number of Tchaikovsky's works for orchestra, but the scope of their ideas, the mastery of their form, the power and expressiveness of their content. He demonstrated that the classical form of symphony, considered by some to be *outdated*, is so full of life and so flexible that it can represent the deepest strivings of the *contemporary restless spirit*" [5, pp. 132-133]. Engel also wrote with admiration about the work of Nikish as a *conductor genius*. The critic paid particular attention to Nikish's approach to the score: "His artistic 'self' is felt in every bar of his performance; it burns like a bright star harmonically *merging with the composer's creative individuality*; it illuminates every thought, every note of the score, filling it with life's breath and never deforming it even when the conductor seems to be reading 'between the lines'" [5, p. 134].

Significantly, this Engel's article, as well as his other article that preceded Nikish's concerts ("Tchaikovsky's Symphonies: Towards the Concerts of A. Nikish"), evoked anger of V. V. Stasov, an apologist of Russian music and Balakirev's circle, who was outraged that the critic called Tchaikovsky "the first of all Russian symphonists" ostensibly diminishing the role of the composers belonging to "The Mighty Handful" (Borodin and Rimsky-Korsakov): an opinion he expressed in letters to his relatives and to Engel himself [see 5, pp. 479-480].

Engel's articles on the "Tchaikovsky Cycle", a series of concerts organized by S. Kusevitsky in 1912, are also very interesting. According to the critic, the first concert has already "attracted a great number of listeners". All of this was happening, according to the reviewer, despite "the recently fashionable in some circles agitation against Tchaikovsky, even the desire to 'abolish' him". Engel noted with satisfaction: "The mass 'still' feeds upon Tchaikovsky. And, after having listened to the best of Tchaikovsky, especially *Romeo and Juliet*, you deeply sympathize with it and think that this 'still' will survive *more than one generation*" [5, pp. 346-347]. Need we say how correct was this insightful and sensitive critic. Similar opinions were expressed at the time by the composer N. Myaskovsky, author of remarkable article "Tchaikovsky and Beethoven" (1912) [2]. Arguing with the modernists' views on the transience of Tchaikovsky's music, Engel wrote about its significance for future generations. The critic urged his contemporary opponents of Tchaikovsky to abandon the "*cheeky dismissive tone*", because "such a tone <...> is inappropriate regarding a talent of such an indisputable strength as Tchaikovsky; it *humiliates*, of course, not him, but those who dare <to use it>". Engel believed that "the time of synthesis would come, when the affirmation and the negation would reconcile and would create a final attitude to Tchaikovsky, tested by the experience of *differently feeling generations*. And how could we doubt that *Onegin's* creator *will be the winner* in this ordeal, that he will 'rise in all his glory'" [5, p. 349].

## 4. Conclusions

Thus, the value of Yu. Engel's works on Tchaikovsky is immense. The opinions of this discerning critic regarding the great composer's work were prescient; they were developed and substantiated by the scholars and the entire culture of 20th and 21st centuries.

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